

# Activating Inner Compass

## A Journey of Compassionate Wisdom

A Report to The D.H. Chen Foundation

VolTra × ELCHK × The D.H. Chen Foundation | July – December 2025 | Yogyakarta, Indonesia



### AT A GLANCE

Partners	VolTra, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong, The D.H. Chen Foundation
Location	Prambanan Temple Compound, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Participants	12 youth (aged 13–23) + 2 ELCHK social workers
Funding	HK\$262,558
Focus	Youth mental wellness through immersive service-learning

## Executive Summary

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In 2025, with the generous support of The D.H. Chen Foundation, VolTra and Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong (ELCHK) brought twelve young people – aged 13 to 23, all navigating mental health challenges – on a seven-day immersive service programme to Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They worked at the Prambanan Temple Compound, played with children across a language barrier, stayed up until the early hours talking about things they had never said aloud. They came home changed. Six months later, most of those changes held.

The need is real. Over 60% of Hong Kong secondary students report high academic stress. More than 30% of adolescents show symptoms of depression or anxiety. This programme asked a different question: what happens when you give a young person an entirely new room – one where they are not a student, not a patient, but a contributor, a builder, a person in motion?

The impact was meaningful. Measured through the PERMA wellbeing framework:

- Overall wellbeing scores: 5.3 → 5.9 → 6.2 (pre / post / 6 months)
- Relationships +27% immediate gain, fully sustained at six months
- Engagement continued rising after return – strongest sustained domain
- Anxiety reduced 27%; Anger reduced 36% at six months
- Volunteering participation rose +109% from baseline, sustained at six months

An unexpected finding. The two ELCHK social workers were equally transformed – PERMA overall 7.3 – pointing toward a “heal-the-healer” dimension we intend to design for going forward.

A model has emerged. Four non-negotiable conditions: a trusted local anchor; genuine psychological distance; professional accompaniment throughout; structured reflection at every stage.

## A Letter from the Executive Director

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*Dear Friends at The D.H. Chen Foundation,*

There is a particular kind of courage that doesn't announce itself. It shows up at 5 o'clock in the morning, knocking softly on a door, asking if someone will come outside with them – because the night has been long and the dark has been heavy, and something in them knows they shouldn't face it alone.

That is what happened in Yogyakarta. That is what your trust made possible.

I expected the young people to be moved. I did not expect the social workers who accompanied them to be equally transformed. I did not expect a young woman, managing her emotions through medication, to rediscover what it felt like to cry freely. I did not expect a young man who had spent years unable to imagine a future to start, quietly, imagining one.

This report is our honest account of what happened – what bloomed, what challenged us, what we are still sitting with, and what we believe is waiting to be built.

We are deeply grateful. And we are ready to go further – together, if you are willing.

*With warmth,*

Olivia Ma

Executive Director, VolTra

## Why This, Why Now

There is a generation of young people in Hong Kong who are, by most external measures, doing fine. They go to school. They sit their exams. They answer when spoken to. But beneath the surface is something harder to name: a quiet, accumulated weight of performing okayness in environments that don't have much patience for anything else.

Over 60% of Hong Kong secondary students report high academic stress (HKFYG, 2022). More than 30% show symptoms of depression or anxiety (CUHK, 2021). The opportunity gap widened post-COVID, particularly for youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (UNICEF HK, 2021).

The qualitative evaluation of ELCHK's *Embrace Your Heart 2.0* programme revealed five persistent existential themes: identity struggle; passive roles in psychiatric treatment; absence of family support; dissatisfaction in peer relationships; and uncertainty about the future.

*"I feel like my whole childhood and adolescence wasn't real. When people ask what I want to do with my life, I genuinely can't answer. My mind just goes blank."*

— Qualitative participant, Embrace Your Heart 2.0

## Theory of Change

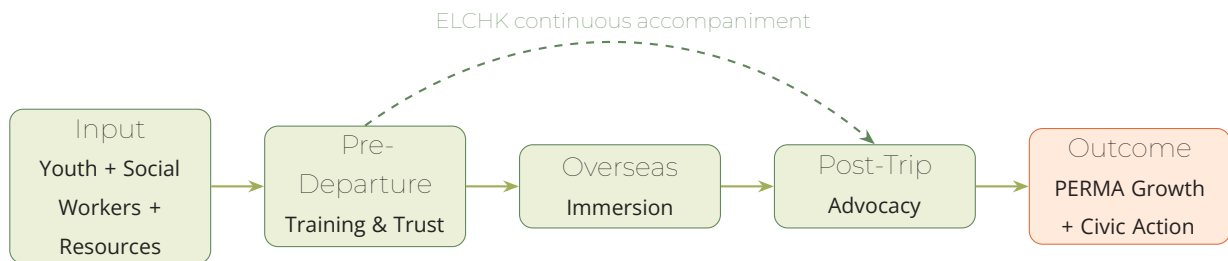


Figure 1: Programme Theory of Change: from pre-departure preparation through immersive service to sustained local impact.

## The Journey

### Before Departure

Two sessions brought the group together before any passport was stamped. There was practical preparation – learning about the Prambanan site, designing activities for local children, understanding what conservation work would involve. But more importantly, there was the beginning of something relational: a group of young people who had mostly been navigating their inner lives in private, starting to be in a room together.

A reflection exercise called *“This I Believe”* became an early anchor. Participants named something they held true – a value, a way of seeing, a small piece of how they understood themselves. For several, it was the first time they had been asked to speak from that place without also being asked to justify or resolve it.



Figure 2: Pre-departure training – mapping hopes, fears and expectations.

### Seven Days in Yogyakarta

They arrived at the Prambanan Temple Compound – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – and got to work.



(a) Heritage conservation – hands on ancient stone, contributing to something larger than themselves.



(b) Dressed in traditional Javanese clothing – stepping into a different way of being in the world.

The accommodation was simple. The pace was different. There was no exam the next morning. This distance – physical and psychological – created a kind of permission. Young people who had spent years keeping their inner lives carefully contained found themselves speaking.

*“They got into the zone quicker than expected – full of tears, laughter, and honest feelings about each other.”*

— VolTra Facilitator

One evening’s debrief ran nearly three hours. Nobody moved toward the door.

「不會說出那些『不要緊啦，不要想那麼多』那種說話。」

*“No one said ‘it doesn’t matter, don’t overthink it.’ They just listened.”*

A small group who struggled with insomnia found each other in the small hours. One night they knocked on a facilitator’s door at 5am. He came out. They exercised. They watched the sunrise. They fell asleep together. Nobody planned that moment.

### Coming Home

Returning to Hong Kong is its own kind of passage. The city does not soften because a person has changed inside it. The academic pressure re-assembles. The family dynamics resume.

ELCHK held the bridge. Participants were woven back into the *Embrace Your Heart 2.0* programme – not as recipients but as contributors: sharing stories in exhibitions, helping design the second cohort’s activities, becoming senior peers for the next group. In addition, the Social Good Start-up Fund was activated to support participants in initiating their own community projects within the programme. These efforts translated experiences into tangible action, completing a meaningful cycle from reflection to contribution.

Six months later, the group gathered again. Some had felt the academic tide come back in. The session created space for that too – for the acknowledgement that growth is not a straight line, and that needing support again is not evidence of failure.



Figure 4: The group reunited in Hong Kong – six months post-programme, still connected.

## What Changed: Programme Impact

### PERMA Well-Being Results

We assessed programme impact through the PERMA framework across participant surveys, facilitator observation, and six months of follow-up. Twelve youth participants and two ELCHK social workers completed the validated PERMA questionnaire at three time points (all scores on a 0–10 scale).

PERMA Domain	Pre	Post Imm.	Change	Post 6 mo.	SW Imm.
P – Positive Emotion	5.5	6.1	▲ 0.6 (+11%)	6.2	7.3
E – Engagement	5.6	6.1	▲ 0.5 (+9%)	6.4	7.3
R – Relationships	4.8	6.1	▲ 1.3 (+27%)	6.1	7.7
M – Meaning	4.9	5.6	▲ 0.7 (+14%)	5.9	7.3
A – Accomplishment	5.5	5.9	▲ 0.4 (+7%)	6.2	7.0
Overall PERMA	5.3	5.9	▲ 0.6 (+11%)	6.2	7.3

Table 1: PERMA domain scores across three time points (youth cohort) with social worker (SW) reference. 8 participants have full three-phase data; 4 have pre and immediate data only.

### Reduction in Negative Well-Being Indicators

Indicator	Pre	Post Imm.	Change	Post 6 mo.	Change (6 mo.)
Anxiety	7.5	5.4	▼ 2.1 (-27%)	5.4	▼ 2.1 (-27%)
Loneliness	6.4	6.3	▼ 0.1 (-2%)	4.7	▼ 1.7 (-26%)
Anger	5.8	5.0	▼ 0.8 (-14%)	3.7	▼ 2.1 (-36%)
Sadness	7.3	5.8	▼ 1.5 (-21%)	6.3	▼ 1.0 (-14%)

Table 2: Negative well-being indicators – lower scores indicate improvement.

### Domain Narratives

#### P – Positive Emotion: Permission to Feel

Before the programme, the cohort’s average positive emotion score sat at 5.5 – a middling number that reflects something real: these were young people who had learned, over years, to manage their inner lives by dampening them. One participant had been taking medication that left her feeling less like herself:

「如果沒得哭，就覺得好像不像人一樣。我就覺得寧願還是有本身的情緒。我會覺得這樣才是自己。」  
*"If I can't cry, I don't feel like myself. I'd rather have my own emotions – that's what makes me, me."*

### E – Engagement: From Presence to Participation

Engagement scores moved from 5.6 to 6.1 post-programme, and continued climbing to 6.4 at six months – the strongest sustained growth of any domain. Engagement is hard to fake. It shows up when a person is genuinely inside an experience.

What shifted was visible in the room. Sharing sessions ran long. Young people who had historically existed on the edges of group dynamics began to take up space – not because they were told to, but because something in the environment made it feel possible.

「去完印尼團之後好像多了很多好朋友。」  
*"After Indonesia, I suddenly had so many more real friends."*



Figure 5: Pure, unguarded joy – a participant discovering gamelan for the first time.

### R – Relationships: A Different Kind of Knowing

Relationships showed the largest single jump: from 4.8 to 6.1, a gain of 1.3 points, fully sustained at six months. These young people arrived knowing something about struggle – but had mostly carried it alone. In Indonesia, they found each other.

「大家都是知道對方大概有什麼情況。」  
*"We all knew, more or less, what the others were going through."*

### M – Meaning: From Shame Toward Wholeness

Meaning scores rose from 4.9 to 5.6 post-programme, and continued to 5.9 at six months. Young people began to hold their own struggles differently – less as evidence of something broken, more as part of what it means to be human.

*"I don't think this is something shameful anymore. It's just something I'll get through. And if I'm happy now – that's enough."*

— Youth participant, six months post-programme

「我覺得這些東西不是一件醜事，我覺得只是一個我一定會過去的經歷。」

### A – Accomplishment: A Wider Ground to Stand On



Figure 6: A participant joins Indonesian schoolchildren mid-game – no shared language needed.

Accomplishment scores rose from 5.5 to 5.9 immediately, reaching 6.2 at six months. Hong Kong asks its young people to measure themselves almost entirely through academic performance. In Indonesia, they found other ground.

One young man, convinced he had nothing to offer outside academics, returned and took his first manual labour job – following up a friendship made on the trip.

「印尼團結識了我的朋友，然後跟他去做了幾天冷氣，發現還有其他事可以做。」

*"I met a friend on the Indonesia trip and did air-conditioning work with him. I discovered there were other things I could do."*

## Civic Engagement and Cross-Cultural Competence

Beyond PERMA well-being, the programme assessed participants’ civic engagement, cross-cultural competence, and reflective practices.

### Civic and Cross-Cultural Indicators

Indicator	Pre	Post Imm.	Change	Post 6 mo.	Change
Cross-cultural empathy	6.6	6.8	▲ 0.2	6.9	▲ 0.3
Resilience in adversity	5.7	6.2	▲ 0.5	6.1	▲ 0.4
Growth mindset	5.7	6.6	▲ 0.9	6.4	▲ 0.7
Civic motivation	5.6	6.7	▲ 1.1 (+20%)	6.8	▲ 1.2 (+21%)
Global connectedness	6.0	7.0	▲ 1.0 (+17%)	7.2	▲ 1.2 (+20%)

Table 3: Civic and cross-cultural competence indicators across three time points.

Civic motivation and global connectedness showed the most substantial and sustained improvements, each increasing over 20% at six months. Participants returned not only with new relationships but with a sense of themselves as connected to something larger.

### Volunteering Participation

Metric	Pre	Post Imm.	Post 6 mo.
Avg. volunteering sessions (past 3 months)	2.2	4.1	4.6
Change from baseline	-	▲ 1.9 (+86%)	▲ 2.4 (+109%)

Table 4: Volunteering participation: average sessions per participant in past 3 months.

Average volunteering sessions nearly doubled immediately after and continued rising at six months – a 109% increase from baseline. This sustained engagement suggests the programme catalysed not a temporary burst of civic energy, but a durable shift in how participants related to contribution and community.

Reflective Practice Habits

Reflection Frequency	Pre (n=11)	Post Imm. (n=12)	Post 6 mo. (n=10)
Daily / Several times per week	4 (36%)	1 (8%)	2 (20%)
About once a week	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	1 (10%)
Once or twice a month	2 (18%)	6 (50%)	1 (10%)
Almost never	5 (45%)	4 (33%)	6 (60%)

Table 5: Self-reported reflective practice frequency across time points.

Reflection shifted immediately post-programme (50% reflecting monthly). However, 60% reported almost never reflecting at six months – a key design area for future iterations, pointing to the need for embedded everyday reflective touchpoints after return.

## Qualitative Findings: Voices and Themes

The quantitative data tells one part of the story. The other part emerges from the qualitative evaluation of ELCHK's *Embrace Your Heart 2.0* – fifteen in-depth interviews with youth participants, analysed through thematic analysis.

### What Young People Were Carrying

Identity struggle, constrained roles in psychiatric treatment, absent family support, fraught peer relationships, and pervasive uncertainty about the future formed a dense web of experience.

*"I feel like I'm like a magazine – the cover doesn't match what's inside. I automatically perform a persona, and then when I look back, I feel embarrassed by it."*

— Youth participant

「現在壓力真的不少，你學業壓力，你家庭壓力，你現在有朋友壓力，還有社交壓力……還有青春期，容貌焦慮，體重，身材焦慮，一股腦全部上來。」

*"Academic pressure, family pressure, friendship pressure, social pressure...and puberty, appearance anxiety, weight anxiety. All of it hits at once."*

### The Progressive Shift: From Passive to Active

One of the most consistent findings was a gradual movement from passive service recipient to active participant and, eventually, contributor. What mattered was not any single activity, but the cumulative sense that their agency was real and welcome.

「後來……隨著這些經歷多了，我自己都會沒那麼……慢慢知道怎樣去處理自己情緒。」

*"Over time, as the experiences accumulated, I gradually learned how to manage my own emotions."*

### The Changing Role of Practitioners

A consistent theme was the contrast between feeling *processed* and feeling *accompanied*. The practitioners in this programme modelled something different.

*"The way we talked here was more like friends. They didn't keep telling me to do the same thing even when I said it wasn't working."*

— Youth participant

「社工真的有聽完我說之後，消化了我說的話。我的感覺是這樣。」

*"The social worker actually digested what I said. That was what it felt like."*

## Reconstructing Meaning and Self

Young people began to hold their own struggles differently – less as evidence of something broken in them, more as part of what it means to be human.

「我覺得這些東西不是一件醜事，我覺得只是一個我一定會過去的經歷。」

*"I don't think this is something shameful anymore. It's just something I'll get through."*

## A Finding We Did Not Expect

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The most unexpected discovery did not come from the youth participants. It came from the ELCHK social workers.

These are people who hold others' pain as a vocation. Over time, that work accumulates in them – quietly, without always being named. In Yogyakarta, immersed in the same experience as the young people – not as observers but as fellow travellers – they released things they had been carrying. They remembered what had drawn them to this work.

Their PERMA scores averaged 7.3 overall – substantially higher than the youth cohort's 5.9 – with Relationships scoring 7.7, the highest single domain score in the entire dataset.

### The Heal-the-Healer Effect

When the people who hold young people are themselves well-held, the quality of care that flows from them deepens. This is not incidental to programme impact – it is inseparable from it. We intend to design for it going forward.

## What the Data Shows, and What It Doesn't

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Most participants showed meaningful improvement in PERMA scores – particularly in positive emotion, relationships, and meaning. Those who arrived with the lowest baseline scores often showed the most significant movement.

Some participants showed softer scores at six months. The six-month window coincided with the return of a full academic year. The pressures were waiting. This is not evidence that the programme fell short – it is evidence that one week cannot undo years of accumulated pressure.

What the narrative data also shows: participants were more able to recognise and name what they were feeling. More likely to reach out than to withdraw. More willing to speak about struggle with at least one trusted person.

*“Resilience is not the absence of hard things. It is the quiet knowledge, somewhere in the body, that you have moved through hard things before.”*

## What We Learned

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1. The overseas environment created something that cannot be fully replicated locally. Physical distance from Hong Kong's pressures, combined with genuine unfamiliarity, produced an openness that is much harder to generate in familiar settings.
2. Continuity of care is the architecture of lasting change. The journey mattered because ELCHK was already there – before the plane, and long after it landed.
3. Peers do the work that professionals can only create conditions for. The social workers made it safe. The young people healed each other.
4. Reflection is not supplementary – it is the mechanism. Without the journaling, the debriefs, the long evenings of being witnessed, the experiences would have been thinner.
5. The practitioners in the room are participants too. We did not design for this at the outset – it arrived as a gift. We intend to design for it going forward.

## What Could Come Next

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### Four Non-Negotiable Conditions

1. A trusted local anchor. The local partner must have existing relationships with participants before the programme begins.
2. Genuine psychological distance. Participants must be truly displaced from their familiar environment – not just geographically, but internally.
3. Professional accompaniment throughout. Social workers present before the journey, inside it, and after it.
4. Structured reflection at every stage. Journaling, facilitated debrief, peer sharing – woven through the design, not added at the end.

### What Each Partner Brings

VolTra brings programme architecture, a global network of vetted overseas workcamp partners, cross-cultural facilitation, and the design that turns a service trip into a developmental journey.

ELCHK brings what VolTra cannot: existing trust with participants, professional social work accompaniment, and the long thread of pre- and post-programme engagement.

The D.H. Chen Foundation brings the ability to convene, connect NGO partners across a grantee network, support longitudinal learning, and hold the long view of responsible scale.

### Scaling Thoughtfully

- Develop participants as Mental Wellness Ambassadors
- Adopt a formal “heal-the-healer” model for practitioners
- Longitudinal PERMA tracking across multiple cohorts
- Expand through VolTra’s global network (Southeast Asia, Mainland China)
- Strengthen post-return infrastructure – ongoing peer communities

## Conclusion

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One young person at a time, one trusted partner at a time, one journey at a time – this is how a model becomes a movement.

The young people who arrived in Yogyakarta were not broken. They were extraordinarily capable – navigating complex family dynamics, managing mental health without adequate support, performing competence in environments that offered very little in return. What they needed was not rescue. They needed a different kind of room.

We gave them that room, for seven days. ELCHK held the relationship that made it mean something. The D.H. Chen Foundation made it possible at all.

### Key Outcomes at a Glance

- ▲ Overall PERMA: 5.3 → 5.9 → 6.2 across three time points
- ▲ Relationships: +27% immediate, fully sustained at 6 months
- ▲ Engagement: continued rising after return – strongest sustained domain
- ▼ Anxiety: -27%, sustained at six months
- ▼ Anger: -36% at six months
- ▲ Volunteering: +109% from baseline at six months
- ▲ Civic motivation: +21% at six months
- ▲ Social worker PERMA overall: 7.3 – heal-the-healer effect demonstrated

## Publicity

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VolTra has shared this project publicly in accordance with the grant's communication requirements. In all external communications, The D.H. Chen Foundation (陳廷驊基金會) has been acknowledged as Growth Partner.

A LinkedIn post was published approximately one month after the trip, sharing highlights of the overseas journey. A second LinkedIn post will be published alongside this project report.

An accompanying ELCHK social worker has been invited to share his personal experience and transformation at VolTra's Annual Event in April. All publicity efforts are submitted to The D.H. Chen Foundation for review and approval in advance of publication.

## In Gratitude

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*To The D.H. Chen Foundation:* this work exists because you believed it was worth doing before we had evidence that it would work. That kind of trust is rarer than funding.

*To the ELCHK social workers* who walked every step of this journey – who were changed by it as surely as the young people they accompanied – thank you for your courage and your care.

*To the Hong Kong Red Cross,* for helping us give participants a language for their inner lives through the journaling tools you helped shape.

*And to the young people themselves:* you were braver than you knew. You still are.

Report prepared by VolTra | [www.voltra.org](http://www.voltra.org)

*Activating Inner Compass: A Journey of Compassionate Wisdom*

VolTra × Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong × The D.H. Chen Foundation, 2025